

Greed, grit, and grandeur: Roman civilization in the Victorian nursery

Mark Bradley

Mark Bradley explores the representation of Roman civilization in the language, imagery and storytelling of the emergent children's literature of Victorian and Edwardian England. He discusses the ways in which younger readers at the turn of the twentieth century were exposed to the society, history, and culture of ancient Rome. Examining the works of several successful children's authors across this period, he argues that they reflect a broader contemporary interest in comparing and contrasting the classical past with the social, political, and moral climate of the British imperial present.

Roman imperialism or Rule Britannia?

In 1852, Gilbert à Beckett – a celebrated English comic writer and one of the original staff of *Punch* magazine – put together his innovative *Comic History of Rome* which presented Roman history as a series of tableaux with very British themes.

The title page promises a Roman history that is very much in tune with the themes, events, and figures of contemporary British history: the Olympian gods at the top inspired by a welter of famous European figures, the slightly chubby goddess Roma that might remind some of the middle-aged Queen Victoria, and at the bottom a rather unsettling version of the wolf from *Little Red Riding Hood* nurturing the twins Romulus and Remus.

As he explains in his preface, Beckett had set out to use the 'comic' theme to make Roman history more amusing and appealing to the wider public. Part of that amusement was generated by Beckett's sometimes far-fetched efforts to assimilate Roman events to British themes and morals.

So it is that Mars is transformed into a British officer (complete with Roman plume) when he meets the coy future mother of Romulus and Remus (right). Everything seems above board and gentlemanly in this version of Rome's foundation, though aspects of the picture, such as the soldier's enormous plume, may conjure up a less innocent interpretation and one more in line with the original violent tale of rape and pillage.

So too is the rape of the Sabine Women sanitized for Beckett's readers (below): as Beckett put it, 'The weather being propitious, all the Sabine beauty and fashion were attracted to the place, and the games, consisting of horse racing, gave to the scene all the animation of a cup day at Ascot. Suddenly, at a pre-concerted signal, there was a general elopement of the Roman youth with the Sabine ladies, who were, in the most ungallant manner, abandoned to their fate by the Sabine gentlemen'. So, as perhaps we ought to expect in the heyday of the British Empire, the nastier elements of Roman imperialism are played down by the author. Here, the victims of Roman expansionism had it coming.

And the republican general Flamininus restores 'freedom' to the Greek cities by presiding over the Isthmian Games and causing so much cheer that the locals interrupt their game of *cricket* in order to applaud him (p. 29 top). Beckett's Roman Empire, then, was (by and large) a giant gentleman's club; no imperial abuses, nothing that makes Rome look like a complicated role model for the young Victorian reader, though all presented with a wry sense of humour.

This is not to say that tales of misconduct are omitted; indeed, the proper punishment of scoundrels and rebels was

a key component in Victorian representations of Roman history. The political troublemaker Tiberius Gracchus, for example, is turned into Humpty Dumpty after he tries to overthrow the government (p. 29 bottom).

Roman history for the masses...and for the nursery

A Comic History of Rome, then, is an early example of ancient history propelled into the public world of Victorian Britain. The popularization of subjects that had previously been the preserve of the highly-educated adult elite was a growing trend in British culture at the time. And the emergence of popular versions of scholarly subjects like classical antiquity came hand-in-hand with social and cultural reforms in late nineteenth-century Britain. Particularly from the 1870s, compulsory education together with major advances in printing and publishing technology, saw the emergence of a new 'popular culture' in which classical ideas could be brought to the population at large. These reforms were connected to a need to establish a clearer sense of national identity and so consolidate Britain's controversial position in the world at the height of the British Empire. By getting them to think about their own national history and their connection to ancient Greece and Rome, the system could teach boys and girls to be useful citizens.

Rome, rather like imperial Britain, offered young readers at the time a splendid model of success and grandeur. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Charlotte Yonge – 'Aunt Charlotte' as she called herself – condensed 1500 years of Roman history into her *Stories of Roman History for the Little Ones* (1876), nearly 400 pages of dry and highly moralizing prose littered with line drawings of grand buildings, fine art, ingenious warfare, and impressive personages. The Roman empire was, with thinly veiled allusions to the British Empire, a gargantuan achievement, worthy of admiration and emulation. It was achieved through resourceful

ness, bravery, and a determined commitment to civilize the barbarians. Occasionally, criticisms of Roman imperialism float to the surface: Aunt Charlotte, like others at the time, highlights the virtues of the British Empire by highlighting the vices of the Roman Empire. Rome's utter destruction of Carthage and Corinth in 146 B.C., for example, was a step too far: Lucius Mummius, conqueror of Corinth, is described as 'a fierce, rude and ignorant man' under whose leadership 'Corinth was taken, utterly ruined and plundered throughout, and a huge amount of treasure was sent to Rome'. The inevitable result of this influx of wealth, and a stark warning to the growing opulence of nineteenth-century Britain, was luxury and decadence.

Authors of children's textbooks attempted to interest children in the same debates about civilization and empire that were bothering so many of their parents at the end of the nineteenth century because of Britain's own imperial expansion. By examining the pros and cons of Roman civilization, readers young and old could explore their own society, values, and politics.

Weighing up the pros and cons of empire

In 1893, George Henty published *Beric the Briton: a story of the Roman invasion* (1893), a tale of the trials and tribulations of a young aristocratic British boy at the time of Nero struggling to come to terms with Roman occupation. His preface outlines the ambivalent role that Rome had played in Britain's own past: 'My dear Lads, the valour with which the natives of this island defended themselves was acknowledged by the Roman historians, and it was only the superior discipline of the invaders that enabled them finally to triumph over the bravery and the superior physical strength of the Britons... The Roman conquest for the time was undoubtedly of immense advantage to the people – who had previously wasted their energies in perpetual tribal wars – as it introduced among them the civilization of Rome.'

So: Roman civilization was a good thing for Britain. However, Henty then kicks off his narrative with Beric's companion reminding Beric what that awesome temple of Claudius at Colchester was really about. 'It may be a fair sight in a Roman's eyes, Beric, but nought could be fouler to those of a Briton. To me every one of those blocks of brick and stone weighs down and helps to hold in bondage this land of ours; while that temple they have dared to rear to their gods, in celebration of their having conquered Britain, is an insult and a lie.

We are not conquered yet, as they will some day know to their cost. We are silent, we wait, but we do not admit that we are conquered.' Empire, then, is a double-edged sword, and Henty's young readers are encouraged to identify themselves simultaneously with the civilizing conquerors and with the British resistance. Anyone who has read Tacitus' *Agricola* will recognize some of the same ambiguities and concerns.

Like Henty's readers, Beric the Briton is then put through a roller-coaster test of imperial faith; he joins Boudicca, gets taken prisoner to Rome, impresses Nero over dinner, and winds up as a wise client-king back in Britain. Henty drags his young audience through the moral problems of Romanisation, giving expression to both imperialists and resistance; in the end, he reaches a tidy compromise, and Henty's children can rest assured that no moral stone has been left unturned.

Kipling's contribution

There is no better example of a contemporary children's writer whose literature advocated critical self-reflection than Rudyard Kipling. Kipling, inspired by his own experiences in India, was very much in touch with the cultural and ideological ambiguities posed by Empire, and his literature encouraged his young readers to confront these problems.

Kipling's influential children's book *A History of England*, first published in 1911, was an extended praise of the National Service League, and so flagged up all the advantages brought to Britain by the Roman invasion. Shame, the authors say, that the Romans never reached Ireland: 'So Ireland never went to school, and has been a spoilt child ever since' (!). There were, however, downsides to empire: 'Prosperity and riches are often bad for men, and Roman Britain went to sleep behind her walls' – the same old problem of success breeding laziness, as even Roman writers had already warned.

Kipling's historical fiction *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) also demonstrates the author's cynicism towards empire. In one of its stories, Parensius, a centurion of the Thirtieth in Britain, encounters and befriends a young Romano-British girl called Una in the woods when she inadvertently hits him with a pebble from a toy sling (above). In the exchange that follows, Una tells Parensius that the British do not hunt, but instead make a point of preserving all wildlife, including pheasants. Parensius then says 'What a big painted clucking fool is a pheasant – just like some Romans!' 'But you're a Roman yourself, aren't you?' said Una. 'Ye-es and no. I'm one of a good few thousands who have never seen Rome except in a picture'. It is telling that Kipling's young readers

would not be entirely clear which of the two they should identify with: the innocent British child or the friendly Roman centurion for whom, like Kipling's readers, Rome is just a distant story. In a similar vein, Parensius goes on to tell stories of the town of Aquae Sulis (Bath) with its 'ultra-Roman Britons, and ultra-British Romans, and tame tribesmen pretending to be civilised, and Jew lecturers, and – oh, everybody interesting'.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, classical stories were being exploited on an unprecedented level to shape the minds of the British youth. Rome was an accessible and evocative site for learning about ethics, morals, and politics. But it is *also* clear that this same literature was transforming the way antiquity itself was represented and understood from childhood upwards. Classics and British culture, in the Victorian era as they continue to do today, developed side-by-side so that the understanding of antiquity was shaped by British identities, and the understanding of British society, politics, and morality was simultaneously influenced by antiquity. For children and adults alike, Rome helped to shape the language and rhetoric with which British colonialism and national identity were formulated and described.

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